DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 383 617 SO 024 975

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TITLE Renewal of Tibetan School Curriculum in Exile: A Tibetan-Centric Approach.
PUB DATE 94
NOTE 13p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Area Studies; Cross Cultural Training; *Cultural Awareness; Cultural Background; *Cultural Influences; Culture; Elementary School Curriculum; Elementary Secondary Education; Ethnic Studies; Foreign Countries; *Global Approach; Minority Groups; *Multicultural Education; Nationalism; Religion; Secondary School Curriculum
IDENTIFIERS *China (Tibet)

ABSTRACT

This paper traces the development of modern secular Tibetan education from the time of exile in India in the 1960's when the Communist Chinese occupied the country. A brief overview of the monastic education is presented as a way to provide a context to the importance of integrating Tibetan culture in the school curriculum. The rationale for a Tibetan-centric approach to schooling in exile is offered at various levels of its importance. An integration of Tibetan culture is also attempted. The necessity of preserving the Tibetan culture to help maintain national identity and to prepare students to face the challenges of life in exile and for reclaiming their lost nation is advocated. A constructive approach in this direction is to: (1) identify fundamental concepts and universal experiences in Tibetan culture; (2) develop a clearly defined scope and sequence in terms of creating learning experiences critical to ensure continuity of Tibetan culture; and (3) include activities in the integration that addresses cognitive, affective and action domains. (EH)

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Renewal of Tibetan School curriculum in Exile: A Tibetan-centric Approach

By

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Abstract

This presentation consists of three major parts. First, a brief overview of the monastic education is presented as a way to provide a context to the importance of integrating Tibetan culture in the school curriculum. Second, the rationale for a Tibetan-centric approach to schooling in exile is offered at various levels of its importance. Finally, the integration of Tibetan culture is attempted.

The emergence of a modern secular education for Tibetan children in exile is a recent phenomena in the history of Tibet. It began in the early 1960s when thousands of Tibetans crossed Himalayas to escape from the brutal occupation of their country by the Peoples Republic of China. Like any where else, schooling of Tibetan children in India is plagued with a host of problems. There is shortage of funds, teachers, and teaching materials -almost everything except Tibetan children. Yet, the education of Tibetan children in exile poses a special challenge. There is a crucial need to educate them to face both the challenges of life in exile and reclaiming their lost nation.

An important part of this challenge is to preserve the Tibetan culture to help maintain the national identity. The purpose of this paper is,therefore, to highlight the centrality of Tibetan culture within the school curriculum as a powerful way to develop a strong sense of Tibetan-ness in the minds and hearts of Tibetan children. With the on-going saga of blatant human and cultural genocide in Tibet, the preservation of Tibetan culture in exile assumes special importance. It is premise of this paper that the greatness of a free Tibet must be founded on its own culture and that preservation of Tibetan culture ensures Tibetan identity.

Integration of Tibetan culture in school curriculum is not without difficulties. A constructive approach in this direction is to identify fundamental concepts and universal experiences in Tibetan culture as a first step to develop a taxonomy of Tibetan culture. Integration of Tibetan culture in the school curriculum and in the hearts and minds of Tibetan children will be greatly facilitated if there is clearly defined scope and sequence in terms of creating learning experiences critical to ensure continuity of Tibetan culture. The process of integration is developmental in nature and includes cognitive, affective, and action domain.

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Renewal of Tibetan School Curriculum in Exile: A Tibetan-centric Approach

By Nawang Phuntsog, Ed.D.

The story of Tibetan modern education begins in the early 1960's during a tragic historical period that witnessed the exodus of thousands of Tibetans across the Himalayas escaping the brutal occupation of their country by the Peoples Republic of China. If the descent from the high mountains of Tibet to the lowlands of India was arduous, then the birth of formal Tibetan secular education in an alien soil was no less traumatic. Tibet had a well developed monastic education but the gnawing absence and the sheer importance of a secular education did not dawn until after being forced to seek asylum in India.

From the humble beginnings of the first ever formal Tibetan school with 50 children in March 1960 at Mussoorie, India - it has today grown to be a gigantic enterprise with an enrollment of over 35,500 Tibetan children in 82 schools that include elementary, middle, and secondary levels in India, Nepal and Bhutan. Interestingly, the rapid growth of Tibetan schools followed a period when in the early 1950's "educational systems the world over began a process of expansion without precedent in human history" (Coombs, 1970). The 1985 official report of the Council for Tibetan Education, located at Dharamsala, India, has estimated that 963 students graduated from Tibetan schools within a span of fifteen years since 1970. In the annals of Tibetan secular education, they were the first group of Tibetan students to have graduated from a formal school system.

The same report highlights the decline of academic achievements of Tibetan students as indicated by their performance in the final school leaving examinations - administered once every year by All India Central Board of Secondary Education. Several informal dialogues that the researcher has had with teachers and principals of Tibetan schools in the Fall of 1992 further substantiate the rapid deterioration of educational standards in Tibetan schools. Teachers and principals tend to attribute the educational decline to students or to their families' problems, rather than considering that the school environment may hinder school learning.

In a similar vein, Dorjee (1992),a Harvard-educated veteran Tibetan educator, deplores the plunging educational standards and the absence of "dynamism, electricity and the collective will that

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was visible and palpable in the '60s and '70s in every Tibetan school". In a critical assessment of Tibetan education in exile, Dorjee (1992) further writes that the Council for Tibetan Education's "inept management, short-sighted policies and a host of other problems" have contributed to the deterioration of educational standards in Tibetan schools. Furthermore, he makes a harsh indictment of the Tibetan school system when he states that despite the improvement of facilities and qualifications of teachers, it is still "a common knowledge that our schools are failing to give the right education to our children".

From an international perspective, the nature of educational ailments that affect Tibetan schools is a reflection of the general trend that is apparent the world over. Although the educational crisis is a worldwide phenomenon, its implications in the exiled condition of the Tibetan Diaspora takes on an even more alarming dimension. As education of any country is a deliberately designed attempt to preserve and promote its culture, the education of Tibetan children in an alien soil poses special challenges to Tibetan educators. It is essential to scrutinize objectively its structure and function in order to make changes that will effectively prepare Tibetan children to face both the challenges of life in exile and of creating a new nation.

It is the premise of this paper that the greatness of a free Tibet must be grounded in the foundation upon which Tibetans are at their best: Buddhism as "the inner science" for ensuring individual and international peace and harmony. The next few years will be defining moments for Tibetans and it is crucial to rethink the focus of our struggle - specifically within the context of schooling for Tibetan children in exile. A primary purpose of this paper is thus to highlight the centrality of Tibetan culture in the school curriculum in India and beyond as a major way to develop a strong sense of Tibetan-ness in Tibetan children.

First, a brief historical perspective of the development of monastic education in Tibet is offered as a way to provide a context that enhances the importance of Tibetan culture within the school curriculum. One cannot but marvel at the spirit of determination and perseverance of Tibetan scholars, religious kings and translators who all worked tirelessly to introduce a viable Buddhist culture - the quintessence of the ancient Indian civilization - into Tibet during the 7th to 10th

centuries. By the end of the 12th century Buddhism had so deeply permeated into every sphere of Tibetan life that it had become an integral and unique part of the Tibetan psyche. The inseparability between Tibetan culture and Buddhism is indeed a historical experience of the Tibetan society. Snellgrove and Richardson (1986) make a perceptive observation when they state that Tibet "showed single-minded zeal to the mastery of Buddhism yet showed not the slightest interest in any other form of foreign learning and literature (p 170)". This remark is relevant to the efforts of earlier Tibetan kings and translators who meticulously transplanted Buddhist culture into Tibet - yet demonstrated not a bit of curiosity for other aspects of Indian tradition.

It is important to bear in mind that Buddhism in Tibet is not merely a belief system but is more importantly, as Thurman (1990) remarks, "an educational system developed to cultivate an individual's moral, psychological, and intellectual perfection in the context of an unlimited horizon of human potential (p.113)". Unlike medieval England, monastic education in Tibet did not encourage seclusion, rather it was an alternative form of education with a unique community living focus. Many years of socialization into a graded, chronologically-based school system in India and in the West has clouded our ability to view monastic education as a legitimate alternative form of universal education. Non-discriminatory in age, gender, social status and race, the monastic education in Tibet was indeed a precursor of universal public education. As for accessibility, a beggar from the street had as much right as an aristocrat to strive for human excellence in the monastic institution. Tibetan Buddhist culture that was carefully preserved in the precincts of monastic institutions withstood the test of many thousands of years and has now evolved to be a unique culture that has the ability to contribute to international peace and harmony in a powerful way.

Second, the rationale for the need of a Tibetan-centric approach to schooling in exile is discussed at various levels of importance. Finally, the process of integration of Tibetan culture in the school curriculum is attempted.

Rationale for Tibetan-centric Approach to Schooling

Regardless of how education is defined, one of its primary purposes is to develop knowledge, skills and attitudes that are considered crucial for the wholesome growth of children

within a specific cultural setting. Lawton (1975) clearly establishes the close relationship between culture and curriculum when he writes:

> Curriculum is essentially a selection from the culture of a society. Certain aspects of the way of life, certain kinds of knowledge, certain attitudes and values are regarded as so important that their transmission to the next generation is not left to chance but is entrusted to teachers and schools.(pp.6-7)

Renewal of curriculum is indeed a powerful way to ensure that meaningful experiences are provided to school children to reinforce inculcation and integration of specific ways of knowing, behaving and relating. First and foremost, schooling experiences must begin with an ethno-centric approach so that children are well immersed in their own culture before they begin to learn and appreciate cultural diversity in the world. If the cultural platform upon which one stands and stares at the galaxy of global cultures is not well-founded in one's own roots, the branches that appear later will wither sooner than one would have ever imagined.

Never before has there been a more critical time than today to ensure the need to reinforce a strong sense of Tibetan-ness in the hearts and minds of Tibetan children growing up in exile. At the home front, the on-going saga of blatant human rights violation in Tibet is a great shock to any rightful thinking human being. Deliberately organized and directed by the Communist Regime, the massive human and cultural genocide on the "Roof of the World" is nothing short of "ethnic cleansing". The systematic population transfer of Chinese into Tibet is a heinous crime designed to wipe out the Tibetan identity. The importance of a Tibetan identity is not an ethno-centric notion; rather it needs to be seen within the centrality of Tibetan culture. Tibetan culture and identity are not mutually exclusive but are complementary in nature.

Preserving Tibetan culture is a powerful way to ensure Tibetan identity. It is therefore no surprise that the Chinese government has launched one of the most subversive and subtle forms of cultural genocide: the ultimate dilution of spirituality with sensuous commercialization in the most sacred places of Tibet. The deliberate introduction of cheap liquors, sex video parlors and related paraphernalia in the streets of Lhasa and other remote areas of Tibet is indeed a subversive Chinese

activity to eliminate all vestiges of Tibetan culture. It is a paradox of the present century that the wanton destruction of Tibetan culture is allowed to proceed unchallenged while the rest of world bickers as to what would be an unbiased interpretation of human rights: a non-western or a west-dominated ideology. An early restoration of full human rights in Tibet is critical for ensuring the continuity of Tibetan identity and its cultural heritage.

The importance of ensuring Tibetan culture in the hearts and minds of Tibetan children in exile, then, is even more crucial and the renewal of school curriculum responsive to Tibetan culture is an effective approach to accomplish this goal. Firmly rooted in their rich cultural heritage, Tibetan children will contribute to the enrichment of cultural diversity in the world.

It is important for Tibetan scholarship to reassert its place at par with any distinguished research by recognized scholars. It is in the best interest of Tibetan culture and Buddhism to establish its own standards of research studies so that there is a way to ensure their authencity. The Tibetan institutes in India have a great responsibility to nurture Tibetan scholars who will consistently research in different aspects of culture and present their findings in an international forum. The indigenous perspectives on Tibetan culture needs to be heard loud and clear to avoid further misinterpretation of Tibetan culture vis-a-vis Buddhist tradition in the West. Research by Tibetan scholars may lead to a better understanding of the process of cultural preservation rather than just promoting its understanding to quench the thirst of curiosity.

Internationally, the ethnic revitalization movement has spurred a great deal of interest in indigenous knowledge systems that are increasingly being proposed as alternative educational approaches. For a long time, the alienating effects of colonization and widespread Western educational systems in different parts of the world significantly contributed to the relegation of traditional knowledge structures. Not long ago, there was a rampant perception in Third World countries that the Western system of education was the pinnacle toward which others must strive. One of the reasons for the rapid proliferation of a Western system of education was that it was assumed to be the only effective model leading to industrialization. However, Portes (1973) contends that some traditional values are more supportive of socio-economic development than many

modern values. For example, Japan has clearly shown that traditional values can be blended with highly productive technologies to make its competitive edge in the world market. A consistent message that now emerges from the experiences of various development agencies in Third World is the crucial need to infuse local knowledge in planning development strategies in those countries.

A remarkable feature of Tibetan communities in India and elsewhere is that they have adopted the modern conventions of educational, political and economic ways of life and at the same time have maintained their culture. Traditional monastic education has flourished along with generally recognized formalized schooling structures. Monasteries have established adjunct school facilities to teach English Language and math to novice monks. In the Tibetan communities, traditional Tibetan knowledge structures are indeed complementary to modern liberal arts education rather than being in an adversarial relationship. For Tibetans modernity and cultural preservation is not an either-or issue nor does modernity indicate or demand the demise of their culture. In a world characterized by instability it appears to be an edge for Tibetans to cherish a culture that ensures continuity in this and the life hereafter with a sense of centeredness in one's being.

Integration of Tibetan Culture

Culture in any society is complex as it is primarily concerned with attitudes, values, knowledge, and behavior which may all be covert, overt, explicit or implicit. It is difficult to think of a culture that has not been shaped by religion - an important part of which is to promote socially acceptable values and attitudes. Yet, in the Tibetan context, Buddhism is so deeply enmeshed with its culture that any attempt to separate the two aspects is a futile exercise. Hence, the complexity of Tibetan culture is no exception.

The identification of critical aspects of Tibetan culture is in no way intended to be comprehensive; rather the purpose here is to begin the concept of a taxonomy of Tibetan culture so that it provides a way of thinking for educators to integrate Tibetan culture in the school curriculum. The ambiguity and profoundity that characterize Tibetan culture reflect its scope and depth yet it hinders the effective implementation of educational strategies aimed at cultural preservation unless

there is a clearly defined sequence and organization. There is a critical need to identify fundamental concepts in Tibetan culture as the first step for developing a taxonomy that will help us guide the creation of meaningful learning experiences for Tibetan children as an important part of their enculturation process.

Some concepts of Tibetan Buddhist culture that seem to guide our ways of thinking, behaving, and relating include the belief in a continuum of life, the law of karma , the nature of impermanence and suffering of life, and love and compassion as important bases of human behavior. Voluminous treatises exist in Buddhist epistemology to explain scope and complexity of each of these aspects. A personal perspective of some of the Tibetan Buddhist premises is offered to highlight the importance of Tibetan culture.

Integration of Buddhist teachings tends to develop in individuals a psychological armor or shield to help withstand hardships of life in a realistic way. Embracing the impermanence and suffering nature of life may at first seem pessimistic but that is an invincible truth and like a shock absorber this attitude helps one to accept the ups and downs of life matter-of-factly. Without an attitude of end-all and be-all here, the notion of a continuum of life suggests limitless possibilities in this and next life.

The belief in karma and the continuity of life functions as an internal policing mechanism that consistently monitors one's behavior and prevents wrongdoing of many kinds. In retrospect there appeared to be no established law maintenance agency in Tibet's entire history and the devotion of Tibetan people to Buddhist teachings contributed in major ways to maintain law and order in the country.

Basically, the degree to which one may adhere to these concepts depends on one's level of commitment to certain practices and teachings. Also, one's affiliation with a monastic community as a monk or otherwise indicates the scope and extent of an individual's commitment to different levels of vows and practices. Yet, invariably we are all supposed to be guided by them to some degree.

Integration of Tibetan culture is a social and psychological process that must be reinforced time and again until an element of culture becomes a part of one's internal thinking and external

action. Similar to learning and using a new skill the process of integration is difficult particularly in the beginning stage. There appears to be three developmental stages: a cognitive process, an affective process, and an action process. It is not a linear pattern but may begin at any stage. For example, understanding the concept of karma is a cognitive process while relating it to and reflecting upon it on an experiential base is an affective aspect that may then lead to a virtuous or non-virtuous behavior. Similarly one may be triggered by a happy or unhappy experience that may generate the desire to know more about ignorance, hatred or attachment. It appears that there is a possibility to construct a taxonomy of Tibetan culture that will helps us organize curriculum responsive to the needs of Tibetan children.

One effective way to integrate Tibetan culture in the school curriculum may be to organize learning experiences according to the different learning styles of students. Learning environments that are responsive to children's' personal and academic needs must be created in classrooms so that children have the opportunity to validate or invalidate different aspects of Tibetan culture as they reassess, reaffirm, or reject their experiences.

Integration and preservation of Tibetan culture in the West poses a difficult challenge. The affluence is a powerful variable that can spin its own web around us and then renders us unresponsive to issues of cultural continuity. The conditions of poverty have an amazing ability to bond communities together and culture is indeed a force to reckon with for promoting cohesiveness. Tibetan children in the West must have frequent opportunities to interact with members of Tibetan communities in India or elsewhere so that their root of Tibetan culture is renewed and is further strengthened.

In closing, it is important to reiterate that the refugee problem is a recurring phenomenon and it is here to stay in this strife-ridden world. At the time of writing this paper, several countries, for example Bosnia, Haiti and Rwanda, are like crucibles of war with little or no attention being paid to the conditions and the needs of children. A fundamental paradox of war is the fact that while adults wage it, children are its unwilling victims. The education of refugee children must then become a top priority of international efforts. Children indeed deserve much more attention than ideological

differences that may have ensued a war. Educators have a special responsibility to help create educational opportunities that are responsive to the needs of children in a refugee situation. At the Tibetan front, the links between Tibetan culture and Buddhism are central to the Tibetan society. Also, Tibetan identity and culture are complementary in nature and not mutually exclusive. In fact, the preservation of Tibetan culture ensures national identity and the subversive activities of communist Chinese aimed at cultural genocide must be viewed within this context. The continuity of Tibetan culture in the hearts and minds of Tibetan children in exile is of paramount importance and a meaningful infusion of Tibetan culture into school curriculum is a powerful way to enculturate Tibetan children. A serious threat to Tibetan identity may come from within: our inability to preserve Tibetan culture with the young people who are our future.

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